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ABSTRACT

In 1991, Howard Community College (HCC), in Maryland, implemented an institutional effectiveness plan that attempted to apply lessons from the previous 10 years of college planning. This paper focuses on the problems and issues encountered during implementation of the plan and is designed to provide general recommendations for others establishing effectiveness plans. Following a brief description of the HCC effectiveness plan, the following recommendations are presented: (1) maintain as much consistency as possible, to help overcome skepticism and resistance to change; (2) when changes must occur, make them as incremental as possible to keep the discomfort level to a minimum; (3) provide adequate opportunities for introduction to and reinforcement of the system; (4) avoid poor response rates to mail surveys by administering student surveys during classes; (5) breathe new life into recurring surveys with redesign and exploration of in-depth issues; (6) market internal surveys to other colleges to create a comparative data base; (7) design a method for the board of trustees to maintain the system without becoming too involved in the details and encourage the board to focus on their macro or policy-level role, as opposed to the micro-management necessary in the development phase; and (8) design a hierarchical system to permit numerous indicators for each goal, avoiding the confusion of too many indicators. The paper concludes that the success of any institutional effectiveness system depends upon continued maintenance and responses to changing situations. (KP)

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THREE YEARS AND STILL GOING: HOWARD COMMUNITY COLLEGE'S INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS SYSTEM

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BACKGROUND

Just over three years ago, Howard Community College implemented its institutional effectiveness system. Development of the system had begun two years earlier, so its implementation was accompanied by a sense of accomplishment. However, the truth quickly became apparent. Rather than an ending, what had been accomplished was in reality simply the end of the beginning. Applying the system over the past three years, the college learned many lessons as plans became practice and aspirations became reality. This presentation focuses on those learning experiences as a means of aiding others who plan to implement institutional effectiveness systems as well as a means of building a base of common knowledge based on system implementation. We will begin with a brief review of the system and then consider some of the problems we faced and the lessons we learned.

The Board of Trustees, the presidents's cabinet and the entire college community participated in the development of the system. Stemming from the college's mission statement and statement of beliefs, six strategic priorities were established for the college. This number was later reduced to five. For each strategic priority a number of goals were developed to provide further clarification and direction. Next, to measure the attainment of each goal, a body of indicators were developed for each goal. In this manner, a series of constructs was developed to ensure the college's mission was taken from abstraction to measurable reality. To ensure that college resources and efforts were directed towards the attainment of these goals, budgetary allocations and the activities of employees were accounted for in the budget and the operational plan respectively. Accordingly, the institutional effectiveness system was integrated fully with college's planning system and budget operations.

The centerpiece of the system is the college's ***Board of Trustees Information System.*** This document includes the strategic priorities, the goals, indicators, and a summary of administrative recommendations and actions. Through this document information can be quickly and efficiently transmitted to the Board of Trustees and other groups.

With this background in mind, we can now consider the implementation of this system at Howard Community College.

IMPLEMENTATION

Howard Community College had a long history of planning systems stretching back over ten years. It was hoped that this new system would consolidate under the umbrella of institutional effectiveness all that had been learned before. However, far from being over, the work had just begun when the system was implemented. From the first day, a series of challenges arose requiring modification and continued maintenance of the system. The remainder of this paper focuses on those challenges. Time will not permit the detailing of every challenge faced by the system, so we consider five problems which are representative of the potential range of problems which may present themselves.

TAKING OFF - THE GAME BEGINS

From the outset, the implementation of the system proved difficult. Even though the college community had been involved with the development of the system, especially the goals and indicators, the reaction to the new system was one of skepticism. A definite "show me" attitude developed at the unveiling of the system. Three key questions illuminate the initial feelings of skepticism. Why do we have to have another new system? How does this system differ from past systems? How will this system effect me?

These feelings were more than just the oft-noted resistance to change that people sometimes exhibit. Employees bring their past experience with them and these predispositions quickly become the most important issue to deal with when introducing a new system. HCC had gone through many systems in the past and a recognition of this environmental factor was not taken seriously enough. To overcome the problems faced at the outset, the following lessons are the most germane. First, maintain as much consistency in the process as you can. This averts the problem of uncertainty resulting in an aversion to change and skepticism with a new system. Second, when change must occur, try to make the changes as incremental as possible rather than dramatic. This will keep the level of discomfort to a minimum.

UNDERSTANDING AND LEARNING

A very basic problem faced by the introduction of a system is ensuring that people throughout the organization understand the system. Given the busy work schedules of most people it is important that adequate time be given so people are not only introduced to the system but given opportunities and reinforcement to learn the system over time. With our system, an internal survey showed that not all employees knew the strategic priorities or understood the system. It is important to keep emphasizing the system and its components so that all employees understand how they fit together. This is no small matter and takes place over the life of the system. This point is an easy one to overlook since planners and administrators closely involved with the system use it every day and tend to forget that others are not so intimately involved. For the rest of the organization life goes on and staff are concerned with their own sets of rules and additional organizational changes. The key lesson to be learned here is to develop sensible ways to communicate the system to employees.

Internal Surveys and the Continuity of Data

To ensure that there were good indicators in the system, the college developed two internal surveys- the **YESS** (*Yearly Evaluation of Services to Students*) to survey student opinions, and the **QUEST** (Quality Evaluation of Service Trends) to survey employee opinions. At he outset it was envisioned that these two surveys would provide consistent indicator measurements over time and could be administered with minimal impact on faculty or staff. Two problems arose with the surveys, one with the student and one with the employee survey. First, the YESS survey for students was mailed to their homes the first year and the response rate was disastrous. Over two-thousand surveys were mailed and under two-hundred were returned. Initially the survey was mailed rather than distributed in class to limit its impact on the faculty and class time; however, the survey is now administered in classes every spring. The problem with the QUEST survey was different. After administering the survey for four years it was apparent that it had lost its appeal and was no longer seen as an opportunity to voice opinions but a paperwork burden. Comments on the survey dropped and the response rate also dropped. To breathe new life into the survey it is being re-administered this fall and will be redesigned to pursue some issues in depth along with the information gathered previously. Some detail from the earlier survey will be lost, but it is important to instill enthusiasms into the process again. The lessons learned here are that "time" resources must be expended to gather data judiciously and that employee surveys must be varied over time to maintain enthusiasm with the process.

Another issue has also arisen in that there is no comparative data for these locally developed surveys. This issue is currently being addressed as we attempt to market these instruments to other colleges to create a comparative data base.

The Role of the Board of Trustees

A problem which has arose with the Board of Trustees concerned their role in the process. The board was responsible for the initial impetus for the institutional effectiveness system and took great care in its design, meeting not only to discuss the initial set of strategic priorities and goals, but also to consider each indicator. After the implementation of the system, the crucial problem was to design a method for maintaining the system for the board without them becoming so involved in the detail that the purpose of the system was lost. In other words, the initial reason for the system was to provide information to the board on the effectiveness of the college in meeting its mission. After the creation of the system, the problem is trying to get the board to take a macro-view of the process rather than trying to micro-manage the process as they had done during the development stage. This is a balancing act for which there is no single solution other than to remind the board of the reason for the system and to get the board to focus on their macro or policy level role.

Hierarchy - Multiple Indicators for Each Goal

The final problem faced by the system was one of too many indicators. The hierarchical system was designed to permit numerous indicators for each goal. This allowed a multidimensional look at the goal rather than relying on the choice of a single indicator.

While this approach expands the information supplied by the system, it also confuses the situation due to the sheer number of indicators. Initially the system had close to one hundred indicators. Two solutions to this problem were implemented over the next three years. First, reduce the overall number. This resulted in a system with approximately sixty indicators. Second, denote two levels of indicators - primary and secondary. The primary indicators are the important ones and should be closely monitored, while the secondary indicators are there to supply supporting information.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the success of any institutional effectiveness system is dependent upon the continued maintenance of that system. Just as the purpose of the system is to allow the college to ascertain its effectiveness in performing its mission, the system must be constantly maintained and altered as the situation demands. If this is not done it will quickly become stagnant and be nothing more than a paper exercise with insignificant outcomes.